

## Language Attitudes and Language Contact in an FL Setting

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Since the 1970s, the dominant paradigm for understanding second language acquisition has been to approach it from a cognitive perspective (Atkinson, 2011; Firth & Wagner, 1997). In other words, second language acquisition is a process that takes place within the mind of the learner. The main metaphor that is used to describe this process is a computational metaphor: the way that the human mind works is similar to the way that a computer works. This metaphor was first introduced by Corder (1967) when he discussed the important role that input played in the process of second language acquisition. The metaphor was later brought into clearer focus with the introduction of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, 1983, 1985), input made comprehensible (Long, 1985; Pica & Doughty, 1985), and comprehensible output (Swain, 1985, 1995). Of these, the most important is the concept of comprehensible input.

Comprehensible input is defined as language that is slightly beyond the learner's level but that can be understood through context (Krashen, 1981, 1983, 1985). Comprehensible input operates to present new language forms to the learner in a meaningful context. As learners work to understand the input, they attend to these new forms. This attention to forms allows the learners to notice the difference between their understanding of the target language and the actual structure of the target language. It is the noticing of these new forms in meaningful, understandable input that allows learners to learn these new forms.

While this cognitive perspective is perhaps the dominant approach to understanding second language acquisition, it is certainly not the only approach.

There are a number of other approaches that researchers have taken in an attempt to understand the process of learning a second language. In the next section of this paper, some of the concepts and constructs at the heart of a few of these approaches (the sociocultural approach, the complexity theory approach, and the language socialization approach) will be presented and discussed.

The sociocultural approach to understanding second language acquisition is founded in the work of Vygotsky. In his work, one of the main concepts is what is referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD defines a relationship between a learner and an expert in which working with the expert, the learner can accomplish meaningful, authentic tasks that he or she would be unable to accomplish alone. The expert provides scaffolding information for the learner, so the learner is shown how to accomplish the task that is being worked on. Through this scaffolding, the learner gains knowledge about the target language and how it is used. Some research has found that the ZPD can also exist within relationships between learners, and not only within relationships between a learner and an expert. It should be pointed out that the ZPD does not make all tasks accessible to learners; there will still exist many tasks that are unachievable by the learner even when working with an expert.

Another concept from the sociocultural approach that is important in second language acquisition is the idea of activity theory. Activity theory states that learning occurs when learners are involved in an activity that is motivated by a biologically or culturally motivated need. As Lantolf (2000) states, “Motives are only realized in specific actions that are goal directed (hence, intentional and meaningful) and carried out under spatial and temporal conditions (or what are also referred to as operations) and through appropriate mediational means” (p. 9, *italics in original*). Van Lier (2000) adds that in sociocultural approaches to second language acquisition, the unit of analysis should not be the language used, but the activity in which the learner is engaged. In other words,

it is the activity—which is the motive that leads to specific action under certain conditions combined with specific meditational means—that allows learning to occur.

Another approach to understanding second language acquisition is from the perspective of complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). One of the key concepts within complexity theory is that of emergence or self-organization (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Emergence is an idea related directly to complex systems, that is systems, like language, which are composed of a large number of variables, all of which interact in a way to create a new entity separate from themselves. Emergence is the concept that these different variables re-organize themselves and in so doing create different interactions. The re-organization is referred to as emergence. Emergence is also called self-organization because rather than this re-organization being stimulated by some external force or entity, the re-organization takes place due to the continued interactions of the variables, that is the system's re-organization has as its impetus the system itself; "[it] continually change[s] and build[s] new structures while maintaining [its] identity" (Larsen-Freeman, p. 51). The concept of emergence relates to second language acquisition in that through the learner using the second language in authentic, meaningful ways, the learner's internal knowledge of the language system will re-organize, and this re-organization can be re-defined as development or acquisition.

Regardless of the approach that one takes to understanding second language acquisition, one factor that is extremely important is meaningful, authentic use of the second language. For example, Firth and Wagner (2007) argue that, "Language acquisition ... is built on language use" (p. 806). Moreover, Larsen-Freeman (2011) states that it is important for learners "to use their language resources in psychologically authentic activities" (p. 58). Thus, for learners to experience development in the second language it is essential for them

to use the second language in authentic and meaningful ways. Another way that meaningful, authentic language use has been operationalized in previous research is as language contact (Longcope, 2003; Spada, 1986). So one issue this study aims to investigate is how much language contact language learners in a foreign language have with their second language and another is how great a variety of activities does this contact come from.

Furthermore, Pica and Doughty (1985) found that negotiation between interlocutors made input comprehensible. This was true because when learners were unable to understand, they would indicate this to their interlocutors and then negotiate the meaning of what they did not understand with the interlocutor. Therefore, contact can be divided into two types, text-media interactive contact (TMI contact) and human interactive contact (HI contact) (c.f. Longcope, 2003), where HI contact allows for negotiation between the learner and their interlocutor in order to allow input to be made comprehensible. This is an important distinction because there is research that indicates that lower level learners may benefit more from HI contact than from TMI contact (Spada, 1986). Therefore, this study will also investigate the amount of TMI contact and HI contact that learners have.

In conclusion, there are two main research questions for this study. First, how much overall contact do foreign language learners have with their second language? Related to this question is how much of that contact is TMI contact and how much is HI contact? The second research question is how large a variety of activities does this second language come from?

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Subjects

The subjects for this study were 171 first year university students at a private university in eastern Japan. At the time of the study, the students had been attending university for less than one month. All students were 18- or

19-year-old Japanese nationals enrolled in the English Department.

## 2.2 Instrument

Data for this study was collected by means of a three-part questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions related to biographical information, for example age, type of high school attended, and study abroad experience. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of statements related to attitudes toward language learning and language use. In this section, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a six-point Likert scale. The third part of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate how often in the two weeks prior to filling in the questionnaire they had participated in a given activity in English. This was used to determine the amount of contact, both TMI contact and HI contact, respondents had recently had, and to determine the variety of contact, both TMI contact and HI contact, learners had had.

## 3. Results

The first research question asked how much overall contact do learners have with their second language in a foreign language context. As can be seen in Table 1, respondents averaged 16.4 contact opportunities over the two weeks prior to filling in the questionnaire. This means that the average respondent claimed to use English in a meaningful and authentic way only about once a day.

The second part of the first research question asked how much TMI contact and how much HI contact do learners have with their second language in a foreign language context. Table 1 shows that respondents averaged 9.1 TMI contact opportunities over the two-week period prior to filling in the questionnaire. This comes with a large standard deviation (12.7), so there appears to be some variation among individuals. Also one respondent claimed to have had 92 TMI contact opportunities in the two weeks prior to filling in the questionnaire.

Table 1 also shows that respondents averaged only 7.3 HI contact opportunities in the two weeks prior to filling in the questionnaire. In the case of HI contact, the standard deviation remains somewhat high (7.1), so again there appears to be some variation among individuals. The maximum HI contact value reported was 35 HI contacts.

With regards to question 2, how much variety there was in the activities respondents derived their contact from, there were a total of 29 language contact activities listed on the questionnaire. Of these 29 activities, respondents participated in an average of only 6.0 activities, as displayed in Table 2. The maximum number of different activities that any learner reported participating in was 20.

Table 1  
*English Contact*

	<b>TMI Contact</b>	<b>HI Contact</b>	<b>Overall Contact</b>
<b>Mean</b>	9.1	7.3	16.4
<b>St Dev</b>	12.7	7.9	
<b>Maximum</b>	92	35	
<b>Minimum</b>	0	0	

Table 2  
*Number of different activities English contact came from*

<b>Mean</b>	6.0
<b>St Dev.</b>	3.9
<b>Maximum</b>	20
<b>Minimum</b>	0

#### 4. Discussion

As can be seen from the amount of contact that respondents claimed to have had with English, it appears that learners in a foreign language context do not have much contact with their L2s. This is true for both TMI contact and HI contact. Furthermore, when learners do have contact, more of that contact appears to be oriented to text and media as opposed to being oriented towards human interaction. Considering that for lower level learners HI contact is potentially more beneficial for second language development than TMI contact is, the fact that these learners are engaged in more TMI contact than HI contact indicates that learners are not involved in the type of and quantity of activities that may be the most beneficial for them.

In addition to the overall lack of authentic, meaningful contact that these learners had with their L2s, it was also found that the variety of activities in which these learners participated was also quite limited. This is an indication that learners in foreign language contexts are not being exposed to a large variety of language or language use. Since an important aspect of knowing a language is related to knowing how language use changes in different contexts (Hornberger, 1989; Hymes, 1972), participating in a greater variety of authentic, meaningful activities in their L2 would provide access to a greater variety of language and language uses and would provide learners with firsthand experiences of how context affects the use of their L2. The fact that the variety of different language activities learners in a foreign language context appear to participate in is limited is an indication that the variety of language and language uses that they are exposed to is equally limited.

While the initial reaction to the above findings may be that learners' contact with the L2 is limited because they live in a context where their L2 is a foreign language and their potential opportunities for contacting the L2 are limited, there are indications that this is not entirely true. Certainly the amount of

contact they may have in a foreign language context is likely to be much less than it might be in a second language context (c.f. Longcope, 2003), the maximum values that respondents gave for the amount of TMI contact (92 contact in two weeks) and HI contact (35 contacts in two weeks) were considerably higher than the average. This could indicate that opportunities for contact are available to learners but they either do not actively pursue them or do not know where to find them. In order to investigate this issue a little more deeply, learners' responses to questions regarding their attitudes toward using the L2 were looked at.

In this case, three questions were looked at, specifically, to what degree did learners agree with or disagree with the following statements:

- 1) Speaking with my friends in English does not help me learn English.
- 2) Native-speaker English is the only proper English.
- 3) In order to learn English well, it is important to speak with native speakers.

Considering that there are fewer native L2 speakers in a foreign language context than non-native speakers, if learners have strong feelings about needing to speak with native speakers in order to improve their L2s, it would be understandable that they would have fewer opportunities to use their L2s in authentic and meaningful ways. Considering that this type of native-speakerism has been observed to exist in Japan (Gottlieb, 2012; Houghton & Rivers, 2013), if the respondents exhibit a similar attitude, that attitude may have contributed to their limited English contact.

With respect to statement 1 above, 88 respondents either agreed or agreed strongly, while only 8 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. With respect to statement 2 above, 64 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed while only 13 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Finally, with respect to statement 3 above, 152 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed while only 1 respondent either disagreed or strongly disagreed. In fact, 108



respondents strongly agreed with statement 3. Considering that learners had such strong attitudes towards the use of English, that is that speaking with their friends was not beneficial to their L2 development, that native-speaker English was proper, and that speaking with native speakers was essential in order for their English to develop, it is not surprising that these respondents claimed to have such limited contact with English. In a context where the greatest resource for authentic, meaningful use of English would be friends and other learners of English, these learners seem to have eliminated interacting with those people as being beneficial. Therefore, this attitude towards the use of the L2 must be considered as a factor that limits the amount of L2 contact that learners in a foreign language have.

#### 4. Conclusion

##### 4.1 Limitations

While the goal of this study was to gain insight into how much L2 learners in a foreign language context use their second languages outside of class, the participants in this study were all enrolled in the same department at the same university, so the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Also, since all the participants in this study were in the English department, they may exhibit different patterns of out of classroom language use than learners enrolled in other university programs. Finally, as the study used self-report data, especially self-report data that relied on how well learners could recall their actions over the course of two weeks, it is not clear how well their responses actually represent their real language use. It would be useful to ask similar questions using a diary study.

##### 4.2 Conclusions

As discussed in the literature review, in order for second language development to occur it is essential that learners be engaged in authentic, meaningful use of the L2. Therefore, the findings that most learners have very

little overall contact with the L2 is quite discouraging. This discouragement is increased given that these learners would benefit more from HI contact than from TMI contact, but they in fact appear to have slightly more TMI contact than HI contact. One educational suggestion that could be made based on these findings is that it is important for teachers to stress to learners that they need to find ways to use the L2 outside the classroom, even to the point of providing learners with more opportunities to use the L2 if necessary, for example adding a web-based component to classes as discussed by Longcope (2009, 2011).

An additional finding is the inhibitive role that certain attitudes may play with respect to learners' use of the language outside the classroom. Since learners have strong attitudes about what may be beneficial and may not be beneficial for their language learning, these attitudes are likely to affect what they do in order to acquire the language. If learners believe that using their L2 with their friends is not likely to help them, then they may be less likely to engage in meaningful L2 use with their friends, even though this could be quite beneficial. An educational suggestion that could be made based on these findings is that teachers should explain to students that any use of the language is likely to be beneficial, so they should make more of an effort to use their L2 with their friends.

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